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News Wire

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Coast Guard starts inspecting freighters in the Persian Gulf

Associated Press

ABOARD THE USCGS BOUTWELL -- Crew members from the U.S. Coast Guard cutter CGC Boutwell boarded a container ship in the northern Persian Gulf Saturday for their first U.N.-mandated inspections since arriving from their home port in California.

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The cutter is in the Gulf to aid in the international enforcement of U.N. sanctions imposed on Baghdad after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, checking incoming and outgoing vessels for contraband.

Saturday, a dozen crew members wearing black Coast Guard life vests and helmets climbed over the side of their own ship and into inflatable boats for the short ride to the freighter Marathon II anchored nearby.

They boarded by climbing a rope ladder sent down from the bright orange Malta-registered freighter.

Later in the day, 10 more crew members joined the boarding party for a time-consuming inspection of about 450 shipping containers stacked on the Marathon II's deck. The inspection was to continue into today.

"We have to inspect to make sure the (ship's cargo) manifest and cargo matches what the

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United Nations allows," said the Boutwell's captain, Scott Genovese of Lynn, Mass.

The 378-foot ship and its crew of 179 set off from their home port of Alameda, Calif., on Jan. 3 and sailed about 15,000 miles.

On a low-key, sunny Saturday aboard the white ship, it hardly seemed that the Boutwell was in a region that could become the scene of a war if the United States carries out its threat to invade Iraq to forcibly rid the country of suspected weapons on mass destruction.

The cutter could be called upon for combat duties if President Bush orders war on Iraq.

But on the ship's open aft deck, it could have been a Saturday afternoon on a pleasure yacht off the California coast, as the ship's engineers fired up a long charcoal grill to relieve the Boutwell's cooks for an evening by barbecuing 250 chicken breasts and trimmings.

"It give the cooks some time off," said Fireman Kyle Thompson, 24, of Long Beach, Calif., one of the chefs for a day. "And it lets us have some fun."

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